

Destiny & Character

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Destiny can be defined as a predetermined course of events that is beyond human power or control. It is considered a force which creates, shapes, guides, rewards, and afflicts human life. The elements of a character's true personality and attitude make that fate a reality and force the destiny to become the destination. The stories of *Gilgamesh*, *Oedipus the King*, and *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam* all teach the readers that destiny and character are intertwined.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, destiny and Oedipus' actions determines the ultimate fate. Oedipus tells the Messenger: "Apollo told me once – it is my fate – I must make love with my own mother / shed my father's blood with my own hands" (418). Oedipus learns this at a young age and desperately attempts to change his fate. He leaves Corinth, where he believes his real parents reside at, thinking he is escaping his unwanted future. Oedipus says, "I heard all that and ran. I abandoned Corinth" (413). Instead of running away from his troubles, he puts the element of fate into motion. As a reckless, hot-headed youth, Oedipus ends up inflicting immortal wounds on his own father after a mere quarrel. He is obviously ignorant of the fact that the victim was his own father. Later, he successfully solves the riddle of Sphinx. Again, without knowledge, he marries the widow queen of Thebes and his very own mother, Jocasta. If he had taken the prophecy more seriously, he would have avoided conflicts or interactions with older people. Instead, he acts in a rash manner. Later, Oedipus says, "Some man at a banquet who had drunk too much shouted out...that I am not my father's son. Fighting words!" (413). Once he heard that rumor, he should have investigated it deeply. By not paying attention to the oracle and family rumors, Oedipus begins the fate that was ordained him.

His own stubbornness and arrogance lead to his fall. Oedipus says to Jocasta when he discovers he murdered his very own father, “Oh no no, I think I’ve just called down a dreadful curse upon myself” (412). Sophocles believed that humans have free will yet they are limited by a larger order that controls all things. By going against the larger celestial order, his tragic fate was determined. Eventually, it is Oedipus who chooses his path, the one of ignorance rather than clarity, and in doing so, he must take responsibility for his actions.

Like *Oedipus the King*, the main character in *Gilgamesh* is also very self-confident and arrogant. Gilgamesh has a desire to live forever after Enkidu, his best friend, dies. Gilgamesh says, “His fate lies heavy upon me...he is dust and I shall die also and be laid in the earth for ever” (36). The death of Enkidu frightens him because he fears his own death. Even though, earlier, Enkidu comforts Gilgamesh by saying, “The father of the gods has given you kingship, such is your destiny, everlasting life is not your destiny” (17). Gilgamesh does not realize that eternal life is not his destiny, this shows his ignorance. When Gilgamesh meets Siduri, "the woman of the vine, the maker of wine," she reminds him of the meaningfulness of being human:

Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man.
(34)

Yet Gilgamesh still cannot rest and is still unsatisfied with his mortal life. He continues his journey to Utnapishtim the Faraway, the only mortal to whom the gods have given everlasting life. With Urshanabi, the ferryman, Gilgamesh crosses the waters of death.

Like Siduri, Utnapishtim asks Gilgamesh, "Where are you hurrying to?" (35), and in answer to Gilgamesh's question, "How shall I find the life for which I am searching?" he says, "There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand for ever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time?" (36). Even after this, Gilgamesh still feels unsatisfied and Utnapishtim tells him the secret of the gods. Gilgamesh learns that he "must prevail against sleep for six days and seven nights." Already tired, Gilgamesh fails the task. In result, Gilgamesh dies. His premature and ironic death can be blamed on Gilgamesh himself because of his ignorance and his desire of everlasting life.

The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam is a tragic story about a son and a father who unintentionally meet in war. Sohrab, the son, finds it his destiny to conquer all enemies and give the throne to his father. Sohrab says, "To brave Rostam I'll give throne, mace, and crown / And seat him in the place of Shah Kavus" (896). When Sohrab and Rostam finally meet, neither knows who the other truly is. Sohrab says to Human, "His shoulders, chest, and neck are so like mine" (915). The two meet and fight three times: the first fight ends in a draw; on the second day, Sohrab throws Rostam, but Rostam tricks him into giving him a second chance; on the third day, after a furious fight, Rostam throws Sohrab and quickly stabs him. Drawing his final breaths, Sohrab confesses to Rostam that his only wish was to join his father and make him the king of Iran. Rostam, realizing that Sohrab is indeed his son by seeing an armband he had given Tahmineh to wrap around the child when he was leaving her, embraces his son just as Sohrab dies. He mourns the death of his son in some of the most moving passages of the poem:

Oh, brave and noble youth, and praised among
 All men, whom I have slain with my own hand! (919)
 Oh, noble youth, and proud, courageous seed of pahlavans!
 The sun and moon won't see your like again,

No more will shield or mail, nor throne or crown.
 Who else has been afflicted as I've been?
 That I should slay a youth in my old age
 Who is the grandson of the world-conquering Sam,
 Whose mother's seeds from famous men as well.
 It would be right to sever these two hands.
 No seat be mine henceforth save darkest earth.
 What father's ever done this?
 I now deserve abuse and icy scorn.
 Who else in all this world has slain his son?
 His wise, courageous, youthful son? (921)

Both are great heroes driven by noble motives. Sohrab's sole ambition is to find his father and make him the king. His desire to overthrow Kay Kavus and Afrasiyab and replace them with the much worthier figure, Rostam, is quite justified and commendable. For him to die at the hands of his own father is the most shocking event. Their fate seems so unfair. Sohrab, in his final moments, blames fate, telling Rostam that: "This was the fate allotted me...What's happened here is what was meant to be" (918). *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam* is a tragedy that teaches readers that to be victorious, one sometimes loses as well.